

Glenda Wiles

From: Tonia Bloom (tonia@mtbloom.net)
Sent: Wednesday, October 03, 2007 9:22 PM
To: Glenda Wiles
Subject: County Zoning Process

RECEIVED**OCT 09 2007****Ravalli County Commissioners**

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Dear Alan, Greg, Jim, Kathleen and Carlotta:

For quite a while I've been hoping to come in and visit with each of you about concerns I have about the direction of the county planning and zoning process. However, the reality is that I simply don't have the time (and probably neither do any of you) for individual visits, so, instead, I am sending you all my thoughts via e-mail.

I would like to preface this by saying that, as it happens, I did not vote for the interim zoning measure passed by the voters last November. I was concerned that countywide zoning of one house per two acres would have the effect of encouraging sprawl and would discourage the denser development that should occur near existing population centers if Ravalli County is to handle its residential growth in any kind of rational way. Nevertheless, the measure passed -- clearly because of people's frustration at the lack of action at the county level. And, it quickly became evident that, whatever its intrinsic merits, the interim zoning would have the beneficial effect of providing some breathing space for county government to finally get its act together and institute real long term zoning regulations. It is this very great opportunity that I have come to fear is being squandered by the Ravalli County Commission and the Ravalli County Planning Department.

Since the interim zoning regulations went into effect I have personally attended at least 6 meetings related to the countywide zoning effort. These included: 2 meetings at the courthouse devoted to establishing work plans; 1 countywide meeting at the fairgrounds to outline the process; 1 informational meeting on demographic trends and to further outline the process; 1 "Nuts and Bolts" meeting in Corvallis; and 1 initial meeting of the Corvallis Planning Committee, which was devoted primarily to an exercise about how to have a good process. (This inventory does not include the several meetings I attended last year prior to the interim zoning, which were supposed to set up a process for establishing zoning in the Corvallis area.) By my count, this at least 15 hours of meetings just this year that I, as a citizen deeply committed to planning, have attended. If I were to attend the upcoming CPC workshop (which I can't because I will be out of town) and then fully participate in the Corvallis area CPC process, I suspect I would be looking at somewhere in the neighborhood of 50 to 100 hours over the course of the next year.

I don't bring this to your attention to complain personally, but rather to point out that I doubt very much that this is what most citizens had in mind when they voted for interim zoning and in other ways indicated that they wanted the county to get off the dime and establish zoning regulations. While there are probably a handful of planning junkies or individuals in the development industry and their lobbyists who relish being asked to spend this kind of time putting together countywide zoning maps and regulations, almost everyone else's expectation is that the county, through its elected commissioners (accountable to the voters and paid by the taxpayers), its professional planning staff (hired by the elected, accountable commissioners and paid by the taxpayers), and the appointed volunteer planning board

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(accountable to the voters through the elected officials who appoint them) will do the legwork and bring a proposal forward for appropriate public comment prior to adoption.

Instead what has been going on is an endless round of meetings about "planning to plan," at the conclusion of which several small groups of self-appointed citizens will be asked to go forth and produce zoning proposals with perhaps a little technical assistance from the planning staff. It is not clear that the result of this will be superior to or have any more legitimacy or public support than would a product produced by people with actual expertise in planning and zoning issues in collaboration with elected officials, who are politically accountable to the voting public.

In addition, as many members of the public are painfully aware, the clock is ticking on the interim zoning, which was supposed to jump start the process and provide the breathing room to get it all done. I would ask you to consider the consequences, both for the valley and for the confidence that citizens have in their government, if the interim zoning expires without zoning having been instituted by the county. I would ask you to use your staff and their expertise to come up with county zoning regulations. Yes, there needs to be opportunities for public input at appropriate times and, yes, there needs to be public comment prior to final adoption, but this notion that the whole undertaking should be farmed out to whoever steps forward and decides to put in the time strikes me as insanity.

During the numerous meetings I have attended, I have found the planning staff to be likeable, courteous and intelligent. I assume they also know something about planning and zoning, but I can't be certain, because there has been almost no discussion of anything other than how to plan to plan. At the Corvallis CPC meeting I couldn't help but wonder what could be accomplished if the trained planner facilitating the meeting had actually spent the same amount of time putting together a zoning proposal, rather than leading a group of citizens in a generic team building exercise. I realized that the time the planning staff has spent setting up the Corvallis CPC and then proposes to spend keeping it going needed to be multiplied by 7, the number of school districts in the valley. I couldn't help wondering what might have already been accomplished if these folks were actually spending their time doing what they are trained to do.

I have a little experience, as an elected official myself, in attempting to get meaningful public involvement in important policy decisions. One thing I have learned over 20 years on a school board is that it is virtually impossible to get more than a small handful of people to pay attention until and unless there actually is a product or proposal for them to respond to, and even then there is less participation than one would hope for. At this point the energy of the county should be directed (and should have been directed for most of the past year) towards producing a good product. The public comment will come after there is something to comment on. And, at that point, since the public comment will be contradictory, partial, and in some cases ill-informed, you, as elected officials, will still have to make the hard decisions and choices about what is in the best interests of the county. And, quite frankly, that is what you have been elected to do.

Having lived in Ravalli County since 1972 and having participated at some level in every attempt to institute planning and zoning in the county, I am absolutely aware of what a hot potato this issue is. I also understand how absolutely essential it is for the economic and fiscal health of the county, as well as for the quality of life of its current and future residents, that county government finally attempt to use the tools available to it to guide the growth that will

inevitably occur. It will take courageous leadership at the county level to accomplish this. An endless process in which a handful of citizens participate will not make the inherent controversies or the inevitable opposition to good planning go away. It's time to get on with it.

Sincerely,

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P. S. I also believe the county should proceed with interim stream setback regulations. The continued loss of stream corridors will be a huge detriment to a healthy environment and clean water. I know of several houses nearby being built on the banks of major tributaries specifically to get out ahead of possible future setback requirements. It's way past time to get some rules established.